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# ‘The still-moving position’ of the ‘working-class’ feminist academic: dealing with disloyalty, dislocation and discomfort

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This paper examines the relationship of working-class feminist academics to the Academy. Our paper interrogates tensions between resistance and submission from the perspective of four educationally successful working-class women who have become academics. The paper starts with an overview of the state of the Academy at the beginning of the twenty-first century before addressing the conundrum that, for women from working-class backgrounds, success is often configured as, or feels like, failure. The paper develops and reflects on four central themes: the dilemmas of belonging within higher education, the challenge of continuing class exclusions, the oppressive and exploitative class relations that remain and are rarely recognized or addressed, and finally, the difficulties around sustaining ‘authentic’ and meaningful relationships with the still working-class. We conclude with questions and suggestions about what possibilities exist for those of us who grew up working-class to put into practice Bourdieu’s injunction to be organic intellectuals.

**Keywords:** working class; feminist, academia, resistance, organic intellectual, inequality

## 1. Introduction

For the last forty years scholarship in British universities has been increasingly under threat from theories and practices conceived in American business schools and management consulting firms (Head, 2011). The main corollary of positioning Higher Education (HE) as a private investment is that there is little commitment, either in Government policy, or the public imagination, to HE as a public good. This onslaught of privatization within the university sector is not just about turning a university education from a public entitlement into a private investment, it is also an attack on the University as a public institution (Holmwood, 2011).

At the same time, creeping privatization of HE has accelerated rapidly since the turn of the century. British universities are now predominantly privately funded, mainly through the mechanism of student fees. By 2014 private finances accounted

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for over 70% of UK university funding (OECD, 2017). The OECD average was 30%, with only Chile and Korea amongst member countries having a higher share of private expenditure on HE. As well as being privately rather than state funded, UK universities are increasingly managed and run by the private sector. Under the New Labour Government (1997-2010) private sector activity in HE grew from 32.3% of all HE spending in 2000 to 64.2% in 2007, more than triple the EU average (Freedman, 2011). It currently stands at over two-thirds (Bolton, 2019). It has also become the norm for universities to out-source key aspects of their work, from the running of their student residences, campus creches, car parking, IT, occupational health services to the maintenance of their buildings (Jabbar et al., 2017).

Just as insidious is knowledge capitalism and the conversion of knowledge into a commodity, i.e., something to be sold, traded and consumed. Arguably, independent knowledge underpinned by academic freedom, is being displaced and/or undermined by a knowledge economy where the value of knowledge is decided by political and economic elites on the basis of its utility to them (Collini, 2013). This has changed the role, and with it, the experiences and employment regimes of academics. Rather, the role of academia has become increasingly one of servicing the status quo rather than challenging it in the name of justice, human flourishing, freedom of thought or alternative visions of the future (Finn, 2018). Whilst we must acknowledge the continuing critique which takes place on the margins of academia, such as through scholarship and activism around ‘decolonisation’ amongst other things, accelerating processes of both regulation and commodification have compounded this institutional shift from spaces of critique to places of complicit silence. As Michael Burawoy (2011) argues ‘British higher education has developed an elaborate auditing culture that has led academics to devote themselves to gaming the system, distorting their outputs, and to the creation and attraction of academic celebrities to boast Research Excellence Framework (REF)<sup>1</sup> ratings’ (p. 30).

The REF and the more recent Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)<sup>2</sup> are yet further indicators of the demise of the public university. If we need evidence of how far UK academia has progressed along the road towards full-blown academic capitalism the following facts are telling. When George Monbiot (2009) investigated the links between academic research and corporate business he found that a billionaire arms manufacturer was chair of the Medical Research Council; the Natural Environment Council was chaired by the head of a large construction company; and the Chief Executive Officer of a real estate firm was chair of The Higher Education Funding Council. Additionally, Oxford University has a Rupert Murdoch Professorial Chair of Language and Communications. As Monbiot concluded ‘the business of academic research is now business not the creation of knowledge’ (Monbiot, 2009: np). Since then there has been a growing intensity, and diversity of business-university relations (National Centre for Universities and Business, 2018).

### ***Consequences for academic work***

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, growing practices of marketisation and privatisation have propelled a transformation of what it means to be an academic, and a deterioration in university working conditions (Naidoo & Williams, 2015). Secure tenured posts are now in a minority with 50.9% of academics on fixed-term or atypical contracts (UCU, 2017). Unavoidable or coerced precarity used to be for the still working-classes as they were often the ones with uncertain and exploitative working conditions, but in the twenty-first century imposed precarity has extended

into professional middle-class jobs, impacting on lawyers, teachers, social workers, and increasingly academics (Leathwood & Read, 2013). Between 2004 and 2010 the total number of students in UK universities increased by 9%. Over the same period the number of HE managers working in finance, marketing, widening participation, human resources, student services and quality assurance increased by 33% (Universities UK and HESA, 2014). While the issue of a bloated managerial and professional service is complex, it has in part been accompanied by a culture where professional judgment has been impacted by the implementation of micro-management practices of audit, inspection and monitoring, and discourses of efficiency and value for money.

Alongside entrenched processes of neoliberalism, audit and surveillance of academic work, we have rampant casualisation. Twenty years ago, Diane Reay wrote a paper entitled 'Dim dross' outlining the low status and poor working conditions of junior researchers (Reay, 2000). Despite campaigning at the level of the union and through professional associations, working conditions have not improved (Murgia & Poggio, 2019). A third of academic staff are employed on fixed-term contracts, 43% of teaching staff and 68% of research-only staff (HESA, 2019). Only the catering and residential care industries employ a higher proportion of fixed-term contract workers. Over the last decade we are also seeing a new deeper form of exploitation in UK HE—zero-hours contracts, currently, 47% of 'teaching-only' contracts are zero-hours, offering workers no certainty of hours or income. Spending on outsourced workers — often employed on zero-hour contracts by separate companies to work on campuses — has more than doubled in seven years, increasing by almost 70% from 2010 to 2017 (Blackall & Busby, 2019). In this context there is a clear need for a politics of solidarity across class boundaries, where those both within and outside the Academy are subject to increasingly deteriorating conditions (Virdee, 2019).

In the 20 years since *Class Matters* was published processes of individualism and hyper competitiveness have intensified (Chakraborty, 2018) — we have a culture where it is more difficult to be engaged in collective action against inequalities that occur both inside and outside of the academy. On one hand there is hope. The national strike action undertaken in 2018 and 2019 by University and College Union (UCU) members to fight back against proposals to change pension payment, under the guise of a 'deficit' in the pensions fund, was a cause for optimism about the possibilities for activism and collectivity. Proposals for a more egalitarian HE system are also being imagined in increasingly public forums (Gamsu & Hall, 2019). On the other hand, working conditions in the HE sector are steadily worsening with little opposition from HE employees.

In part this is because the UK academic status quo over the last 30 years has been one that increasingly valorizes the entrepreneurial competitive individual (Lund, 2015). Now, with the growing importance of economic and political impact (Cooley, 2013), it has also become a culture that rewards and sanctions compliance and conformity, and moral as well as professional, flexibility (Kallio et al., 2016; The Res-Sisters, 2016). This has particularly damaging consequences for working-class women, and especially women of colour who are just starting out on an academic career.

### ***Feminist working-class academics: still swimming against the tide?***

It is against this backdrop of growing, deeply damaging inequalities in HE that we draw on our own experiences to analyse the relationship of working-class feminist

academics at different career stages in the Academy. Annabel is currently a PhD student, Kirsty and Jessie are both new Lecturers, and Diane retired in 2017 after 15 years as a Professor. Our intention in this paper is to highlight our different class experiences and relationships within, to and beyond HE. While there is a focus on the problems of being in the academy, we also acknowledge our relative privileges, and use this as a platform to call out or ‘name’ the injustices we see (Dumas, 2016; McKay & Devlin, 2016). We also then consider the difficulties of sustaining relationships with the still (and ever exploited) working-class that remain ‘authentic’,<sup>3</sup> and posit the necessity for a politics of solidarity across complex and multiple boundaries of inequality.

Looking back in order to look forward, in this paper we consider themes emerging from the *Class Matters* book and, in particular, Reay’s chapter to speak to four main areas: belonging, class exclusions, exploitation and oppression, and relationships with the still working-class. As working-class academics, with political sensibilities towards explaining and challenging some of the injustices we see in academia and the world more generally, we acknowledge our ‘passionate partiality’ (Reay, 2017, p. 2), and hold this as a valuable and necessary methodological tool in an increasingly metricised and positivistic academy. Through this we also hope to contribute to the ‘partial patchwork’ of complex and at times contradictory accounts of working-class experience (p. 6), in an environment that increasingly attempts to standardise and reduce women’s and working-class people’s lives and experiences to simple or clichéd narratives.

## 2. Belonging

Mahar, Cobigo, and Stuart (2012) conceptualise belonging as ‘a subjective feeling of value and respect derived from a reciprocal relationship to an external referent that is built on a foundation of shared experiences, beliefs or personal characteristics’ (p. 1). Throughout this section we consider the consequences of not having this shared foundation within the academy, and the constant tensions between desires to belong, and the lived reality of this ‘belonging’. In *Class Matters* Reay wrote about the struggle to continue questioning academic culture and values whilst acknowledging the extent to which working-class successes are caught up in them. That is a continuing hazard we face, particularly as socially mobile working-class girls are for the most part the ‘good girls’, who kept their heads down, worked hard, and learnt to comply throughout school. Bourdieu (1994) writes that ‘resistance can be alienating and submission liberating such is the paradox of the dominated and there is no way out of it’ (p. 155). If submission is learned as liberating for the individual because compliance and conformity is necessary early on in our lives (Masland & Lease, 2013) how will we break free of it later on? The costs and cruelties of that compliance are painfully evident in Jackson and Marsden’s *Education and the Working Class* (1966). They write of their upwardly mobile women and men from working-class backgrounds that ‘there is something infinitely pathetic in these former working-class children who lost their roots young, and now with their rigid middle-class accents’ and who maintain ‘the stability of all our institutions temporal and spiritual by voraciously reading the lives of ‘Top People’, or covet the private schools’ (p. 241). This is clearly submission too far, not liberating but rather an emptying out of class loyalty and with it some capacity for class feeling. So, one key concern that might haunt working-class interlopers into academia is how much they have to give up in

exchange for their partial acceptance (Reay, 2018), are they inevitably prey to compromise and collusion?

### *Authenticities and caring*

The notion of having to ‘give up’ part of yourself is something all of us have experienced during our time in academia. This is found in negotiations of how to present yourself in person or on social media, how to dress and how to talk (accent and pace) (Hey, 1997). We are often painfully aware of the need to constantly manage ourselves in order to try and fit in the context of HE. New discomforts have also arisen in some of the taken-for-granted activities of academia; the necessity of formal networking; the process of getting employed, promoted and properly paid and the confident self-management of often unmanageable workloads. These dislocations of environment and prior experience have been scattered and inconsistent, but they are also present and consolidate a feeling of being ‘outside of the norm’.

One of the most acute ways in which some of us have felt we had a part of us ‘taken away’ is in the on-going exploitations and lack of engagements with forms of ‘care’. To give one example of this, each of us has taken on a teaching role within our respective universities. We have each felt the pressure of a context where there is increased student and staff mental ill-health (Gorczyński, 2018), and an ever-present need for pastoral care towards students. What we are coining as the ‘guilty burden’ of pastoral care, highlights how despite this kind of care work being central to our job, we feel overworked and pressurised by growing student-facing roles. Importantly, we want to (and do) take care of our students, but increasingly we are being over-burdened by the sheer number of students and pastoral cases, not to mention the complexity of these cases. We feel unqualified to deal with them effectively and unsupported by a wider context of a depleted NHS system.

In 2012, a UCU stress survey documented the unmanageability of academic workloads where 26% of further and higher education staff report working more than 50 hours per week and – shockingly – at one University almost 54% of staff reported working such hours (UCU, 2012). There is no doubt that the situation has worsened in recent years. This unsupported and large workload makes it very difficult to care properly for both self and others. Whilst it could be said this is an issue affecting academics across the board, literature has highlighted the way in which ‘mothering’ and pastoral care is highly feminised and attributed to academics who are positioned in this way (Crabtree & Shiel, 2019). Arguably, this is also particularly acute for academics from multiply marginalised backgrounds. We find this a ‘guilty burden’ for several reasons. First, our own experiences of marginalisation within and outside of academia mean that we are empathetic towards students struggling to ‘fit in’ at university. We are also often seen as the faces of diversity, for example, as one of few people of colour in a department one may be deemed ‘more approachable’ or ‘more relatable’ than others. This form of work and the time and emotional labour invested into it is often of a hidden nature, particularly when we *choose* to spend extra time with students, or they turn up at our offices upset. It is rarely a kind of extra work that is formalised or acknowledged, and yet it is vital.

There is a growing body of scholarly work in this field which argues that the neoliberal university promotes a form of ‘carelessness’ in academia (Gill, 2009; Lynch, 2010). Lynch argues: ‘To be a successful academic is to be unencumbered by caring’ (p. 63).<sup>4</sup> This is something which is at odds with the values and motivations of

many and especially in our own experiences as mobile working-class women (Rogers, 2016). We often find ourselves asking why does the work that we do matter? And why are our values at odds with the academy as it stands? We have spoken to each other about the continued internal dialogues we have as we find ourselves stuck between wanting to fight against injustice in academia, the guilt of seeing this as a somewhat insignificant fight in the grand scheme of prevailing and deepening inequalities, while feeling selfish in our relatively privileged positions. After all we've 'come so far', we have 'made it' we should be grateful, right? More than this, we are often motivated by a strong desire to support and care for our families and communities who remain in marginalised, oppressed positions battling against poverty and diverse forms of discrimination. We all have parents or siblings who are disabled, have mental health problems, and/or remain reliant on the remnants of the welfare state to survive. We all spend time and energy supporting them to fight for recognition and value and to navigate a hostile and uncaring welfare system. This has engendered within us an anger and passion to make changes in policy to improve the conditions for people in similar circumstances which we attempt to utilise our positions in academia to accomplish.

However, the immense pressures placed upon academics today, especially early-career academics, mean that we often have little to no space left to do the things we came into academia to do; to fight injustice, to care for people in their education. We also understand that in the current context a lot of what we talk about here could be applicable to women of all social class positions, or even most people who work in academia. There probably aren't too many individuals who feel at ease with every aspect of the academy and that never encounter some form of 'imposter syndrome' (Breeze, 2018), or are not burdened by increasingly metricised systems. We argue however that there are powerful and affective class-based experiences, particularly when you have been and become upwardly socially mobile. This is particularly acute for those who occupy positions of intersecting marginalisation, such as working-class women of colour and LGBTQIA+ (Bhopal, 2016; Puwar, 2004). In the next section we hone in on some of those classed exclusions.

### **3. Class exclusions**

A number of chapters in *Class Matters* (1997) question whether the female academic from a working-class background is ever likely feel at home in academia (see Morley, 1997; Reay, 1997). The prevalent myth is that the academy has become more welcoming but underneath a rhetoric of inclusion, the conversion of academic into social and symbolic capital is a continuing problem for both working-class staff and students. Every kind of capital tends to function as symbolic capital when it obtains an explicit recognition (Bourdieu, 2000) and this remains a problem for working-class women, regardless of time spent in academia. Diane, despite her seniority, has always struggled to convert any of her acquired capitals into highly regarded symbolic capital (she became an academic in the mid-1990s when she was already in her mid-40s). Despite having highly cited articles across a wide range of sociology and education journals, she has never been invited to give a keynote at leading education conferences, and was only asked to do so at a leading sociology conference since her retirement in 2017. A section on awards and markers of distinction, indicative of prestige and academic standing, that is often extensive on the CVs of longstanding professors, did not exist on Diane's CV until last year and now has one entry. Unlike

many of her middle-class male contemporaries, she was made to retire at statutory retirement age, ironically as the consequence of an Oxbridge regulation introduced to boost diversity (Turner, 2019). She was then unable to secure a fractional academic post at any of the five institutions she approached subsequently.

*Class Matters* (1997) revealed the extent to which working-class female academics had to prove themselves to a much higher degree than their middle-class peers, were less likely to hold high positions or lead projects, and experienced what Rogers (2016) has termed a lack of a sense of ‘care, generosity and respect’ (p. 2). But how possible is the acquisition of symbolic capital, and the recognition that accrues to it, for any working-class female in the academic field? As Bourdieu (2000) succinctly explains, symbolic capital is known and recognised ‘on the basis of cognitive structures able and inclined to grant it recognition because they are attuned to what it is’ (p. 242). We are returned to the tensions between compliance and conformity to the norms of the academic field and the ever-present imperative we have to challenge the status quo.

### ***Being classed, and ‘raced’ and gendered***

Difference is that raw powerful connection from which our personal power is forged. (Lorde, 1984, p. 112)

Existing on the margins is difficult in academia. Education in all its forms has inspired and changed us, it has helped us understand the world in which we live, and the injustices we have encountered. Now, as academics, we give thanks for our opportunity to participate in the academy (given our non-traditional backgrounds) but are demoralised each time we are confronted by the tokenism of our inclusion. Our place here feels like a gift. As though benevolent institutions have generously allowed us entry. Mauss (2002/1954), argues that in the process of gift-giving a bond is formed between giver and receiver which grants the former power over the latter. We feel the power of whiteness, patriarchy and class inequality present in the academy as we attempt to participate freely, staying true to ourselves and our commitment to liberatory pedagogy. This has taught us that our participation is conditional. We are expected to learn the game of academia, not to challenge it. We should be grateful for this ‘gift’. Our struggle to find ways to exist within the academy confirms we are ‘bodies out of place’ (Puwar, 2004).

Whilst our differences are our sense of power and may be what got us through the door, now we are here they haunt us. We have had conversations about feeling stuck between a sense of fear and responsibility. We are fearful of losing strength and mental stability and feel responsible for changing the system (hooks, 1989), making it better and more accepting of difference for future generations. This is not everyone’s experience, but as one author reflects:

I reminisce fondly of the excited, passionate, intelligent girl I was when I arrived and how a series of events (microaggression, I guess) have left me afraid to participate. I feel undervalued, used, and excluded. I want to fight. But the academy’s power over me is great, it has ground me down and made me vulnerable.

I was asked to teach the ‘race’ content on an ‘equality and diversity’ module at a university. I was told that I would not be paid for this but that it would help ‘improve my CV’. There were no other people employed at the university with expertise in this area. This subject was noticeably undervalued at this institution. This experience made me feel used, worthless and withdrawn.



The academy uses people of colour to make it look diverse – on websites, at conferences and occasionally in paid employment and these non-white bodies are highly visible. There are posters of happy people of colour all over these institutions, but the truth remains that universities promote their ‘commitment to diversity’ through speech acts, rather than meaningful practice (Ahmed, 2007). ‘Diversity’ discourse creates an illusion that obscures who is included, it does not address inequality (Walcott, 2019). People of colour may decorate university walls but their intellectual value and contributions are systematically erased (Ladson-Billings, 2003).

Ahmed (2007) writes that white bodies ‘extend into spaces that have already taken their shape’ (p. 158). For those of us who are non-white, working-class, disabled or LGBTQIA+ we try to squeeze our way in to the academy and ‘take up space’ (Kisuule, 2019). Space in which to be ourselves, share our ideas and be taken as full members of the academy on our own terms. Yet, as it stands there are no comfortable spaces. To combat the feelings that arise from the tokenistic use of our bodies we try and create spaces where we do fit, collective networks that act as support systems, that help people with similar experiences vent and encourage each other to keep going. These networks are filled with so much pain arising from deep-seated structural exclusion that, whilst supportive at times, they can also be exhausting and disempowering. The overall pressures of the academy (e.g., teaching loads, casualization and excellence frameworks) lead to a sense of fatigue which can undermine solidarity between its members. The desire to find a space to fit within the academy reduces one’s capacity to see and challenge the systematic flaws of the academy (Crenshaw, 1991). All too often, as we struggle to maintain our differences as strengths they are simultaneously devalued and exploited.

#### **4. Exploitation and oppression**

There are a whole set of class relations in the Academy that may not be connected to levels of credentials or socio-economic position but still constitute oppressive class relations. *Class Matters* (1997) highlighted the chasm dividing low status working-class, female researchers and the academic ‘super stars’, but in the intervening period the already existing gulf between academic labour and academic capital has grown wider (Gillies & Lucey, 2007). Early-career research staff are vital to the professional status and career advancement of grant holders (academics on stable contracts). There is a clear process of intellectual extraction in which the labours of research staff both in the field and outside of it are converted into both academic and symbolic capital, which accrue to the project directors rather than to the researcher. See, for example, Rogers (2016) in which a participant recounts a troubling experience of undertaking the majority of work on a project/publication whilst the male professor (principle investigator) attempted to assume the role of first author.

Each of us has felt the burden of the normalisation of ‘overworking’ and ‘overproducing’ in a so-called ‘publish or perish’ culture in the academy. This culture has been compounded in many ways: we are told that we must publish during our PhD, publish in the ‘right places’ (usually paywall journals), concentrate on single-author publications (dismissing the value of collective work) and increasingly speak to our ‘REF-ability’ on entry level job applications. This has become so insidious that even when/if we publish and perish, institutions can take our work for their benefit.<sup>5</sup> Although this is felt across the academy, through classed, raced and gendered boundaries, there is ‘extra work’ that goes into occupying an intersected, marginalised

position in academia. As we have shown throughout this article, this is extra work done as part of, and on top of our jobs. It is work on ourselves as much as it is work with others. It can take the form of both recognised, unrecognised and misrecognised labour but often cannot be used in promotion documents, and in some instances even when it is part of a formalised contract, is not paid (Kandiko-Howson et al., 2017; The Res-Sisters, 2019). It can also become part of more overt systems of discrimination and exploitation, and the underrepresentation and underemployment of marginalised groups in academia for example, in gender and Black and minority ethnic pay gaps (Rollock, 2019; Williams et al., 2019).

Recently, a prominent London-based university advertised an 18-month post in which the candidate was expected to ‘lead and develop’ a new MA course in Black British History. When called out by others on Twitter for its exploitative practices, the university claimed that the role was ‘potentially permanent’, subject to satisfactory student numbers. This speaks to a number of issues raised so far, not only is the content of Black British history undervalued in this context, subject to student numbers and not seen as a necessary part of curriculum, those experts in Black British history who we know are largely people of colour, are similarly seen as expendable/disposable labour. With increased calls for universities to ‘diversify’ and ‘decolonise’ their curricula (Mirza, 2018), this incident highlights how this kind of diversification is part of a process of marketization, seeking to attract new students in a ‘black studies market’. Scholars have continually highlighted racialised inequalities in HE (and beyond) and called out this kind of marketized ‘diversity’ rhetoric (see, for example, Arday & Mirza, 2018; Bhopal, 2018). This particularly telling case of exploitation reinforces the notion that we need to think about how ‘class matters’ but in nuanced and structurally raced and gendered ways (Hall et al., 2013/1978).

## **5. Relationships with the still working-class**

One of the major tensions and a source of psychic and moral conflict for those of us from working-class backgrounds is how to combine critical scholarship which centres inequalities with political and social activism – to espouse Bourdieu’s scholarship with commitment (Bourdieu, 2010) and engage in work that is ‘inseparably scientific and political’ (p. 269). Bourdieu argues that academics who avoid political commitments mistake ‘axiological neutrality’ for scientific objectivity when what they are doing is participating in ‘a scientifically unimpeachable form of escapism’ (p. 180). While axiological neutrality entails a refusal to take a stand (Weber, 1988), scholarship with commitment requires engagement in the collective work of political intervention. It is never enough to create revolutions in our words and texts when we should be attempting to create revolutions in the order of things (Bourdieu, 2010), to battle for a more equal world. We need to fight for the working-classes in academia but we also need to fight for them in the wider labour market where a vicious class war is being waged against those who are working-class and particularly against those who stand up to the disciplining ruthlessness and cruelties of neoliberal capitalism (Giroux, 2008). But how possible is it in the contemporary neoliberal academy to put Bourdieu’s injunction to be organic intellectuals into practice? As Elizabeth Humphrys’ (2011) analysis demonstrates, present-day academia is an unlikely field for generating organic intellectualism. She is writing about the Australian context but her insights also apply to the UK and academia more globally.

The idea of the ‘organic intellectual’ can feel like a trap. The project of a socially mobile working-class person is never a solo feat. It is for each of us a family project, some of the authors have their own children and grandchildren, and we all have parents, siblings and extended families that have in a variety of ways depended on our salaries and knowledge. Rebelling against the elite field we find ourselves in is not a battle we would all chose to fight. Whilst feeling our communities’ collective pain on a deep emotional and psychic level, we may also feel like there are other fights to prioritise. We are embattled and already tired, but know others are further embattled, and even more tired. This is the trap all four of us have felt, desperately wanting to take our families and communities with us, yet often having to prioritise our own survival. We return to the Bourdieusian (1990) notion that ‘submission can liberate’. Often we need to feel secure and valued ourselves before we can help anyone else.

Then there are the many barriers, both structural and psychological, to maintaining ‘authentic’ relationships with the working-class communities and extended families we have inevitably moved away from. We recognise that ‘class based communities’ are not the sum of a person’s identity, position in, and relations in and to society. We acknowledge that belonging to other communities, gay communities, or virtual communities for example will impact on the kind of classed relationships we hold and acquire. We wish to elucidate particular classed feelings and experiences here without misrecognising them as ‘only classed’. In this way we contend that geographical segregation has increased the distance between different social classes in UK society. This has arguably encouraged increasing levels of class homophily (Jarness & Friedman, 2017), even in the more socially diverse localities (Vincent, Neal, & Iqbal, 2019). There exist not only increasing levels of geographical segregation between classes but also growing levels of social distance, and an accompanying degree of bias and stereotyping between those who are highly educated and those who are not. Recent research by Kuppens et al. (2018) showed that highly educated, people like ourselves, showed strong education-based intergroup bias against those with low levels of education, evaluating the higher educated much more positively. Most disturbingly, it was the socially mobile among the highly credentialed who demonstrated the highest levels of bias. The research concluded that ‘the higher educated show clear and strong intergroup bias and the less educated do not’ (2018, p. 33). This suggests that even if we don’t share them ourselves, deficit views of those who fail educationally are likely to be pervasive in the academy. There is the ever-present temptation to fall prey to the comforting thought that we have succeeded educationally because we are intellectually and morally better than those we have, to varying degrees, left behind. Over 50 years ago, Jackson and Marsden (1966) wrote of their socially mobile working-classes, that in ‘glancing back at the society from which they came’ saw ‘no more there than the ‘dim’ or the ‘specimens’ (p. 241). We four have all felt a sense of revulsion at these words. But it is difficult at a period when meritocracy has become even more dominant as a prevailing ideology to entirely escape its intellectual grasp. So, those of us who retain our commitment to fighting for working-class rights and recognition, still face an internal struggle to hold on to egalitarian beliefs and dispositions which are constantly challenged and under threat in the field of higher education. Despite all the widening access and participation initiatives, working-class students (and staff) remain a minority across the university field.

## 6 Conclusion

Speaking back to our title ‘The Still-Moving Position of the ‘Working-Class’ Feminist Academic’, we see this as a sort of generative oxymoron, one that talks about our positions as mapped but constantly being re-mapped. Our relative positions of privilege remain tenuous, fragile, and difficult to own, ones that might always be questioned, filled with guilt, pride, happiness, and strained relationships within the academy but also with the working-classes we have all – to some degree – moved away from despite longings of return. We have laid out some of the ways that being working-class, and being socially mobile are experienced, while feeling fixed by different aspects of ‘who we are’, who we want to be, and who people think we are. Sara Ahmed (2007) has written about ‘the stickiness of ‘race’, and we have all experienced ‘the stickiness of working-class habitus’ (Jin & Ball, 2019, p. 5). We acknowledge that the negative experiences highlighted are not our only accounts of academia, but suggest that experiences and memories here act as ‘intermittent flashes in the dark’, inevitably we have ‘a habit of remembering the wounds and resulting scars of class’ (Reay, 2017, pp. 2-3).

Although this paper has focused on our own accounts, we have related these to wider structural phenomena. We want to avoid forgoing the political for the personal and understand ourselves as embedded in the processes that simultaneously restrain us. We understand that our accounts offer views not experienced by all working-class academics, and these experiences extend beyond class boundaries. Importantly, it is in the very heterogeneous make up of social beings, and indeed working-class lives that we find ‘authenticity’ and affinity. We acknowledge the necessity of affinities across classed, racialised, gendered and bodily differences. Taking inspiration from academics, students and community organisations, we want to finish here by naming some of the studies and stories that position intersectional and marginalised voices in their work. After all this important and often grassroots based work continues whether we write about it or not. Seen in the work of Bassel and Emejulu (2017) who amplify minority and activist voices in France and Britain, and Geographers Hall, *et al* (2017), who worked alongside Manchester -based youth charity RECLAIM, Coventry and the Women’s Budget Groups and Runnymede to consider intersectional impacts of everyday austerity. Also in work done by Heather Mew (2017) and *Thrive Teesside* who are looking at localised resistances to poverty in the North East of England, and scholars such as Ruth Pearce (2015) whose vital work on Trans health is partnered with her advocacy against university outsourcing. There are students who alongside their degrees are fighting for change; from Lavinya Stennett (2018), Working-class Officer at SOAS and Director and Creator of The Black Curriculum, to Olufemi et al.’ (2019) ‘*A Fly Girl’s Guide to University*’, and at the time of writing this article the students in occupation at Goldsmiths raising concerns about racism at the university. Each of these people/groups acknowledge the necessity of involving and centring the voices of marginalised communities and activists and are often these very people too. This work can be loud, but also quiet and everyday, but this solidarist thinking and practice is at the heart of the notion of an organic intellectual, and the centre of our own practices as we move forward.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The REF was first introduced in 2014. It replaced the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) last conducted in 2008. REF is the ‘UK system for assessing the quality of research in HE institutions’, although it has regularly been critiqued, see Martin (2011).

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- <sup>2</sup> The TEF was introduced in 2017, described as a ‘national framework’ for ‘assessing excellence in teaching’ in HE institutions. For a critical response see Neary (2016).
- <sup>3</sup> The term ‘authentic’ is used here as a term to mean accurate, meaningful and encompassing rather than to draw parameters between what ‘is’ and ‘is not’.
- <sup>4</sup> We are using caring in the broad sense that Lynch does, not in a heteronormative sense, nor simply childcare but more widely to include a lack of attention to self care and a focus on individualism rather than collegiality within academia.
- <sup>5</sup> See REF (2018) ‘This will include consideration of outputs ... by staff who have moved into a different sector, died or retired’ (p. 7).

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